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THREE “ITALIAN” GRAFFITI FROM SEMNA AND BEGRAWIYA NORTH

Egyptian monuments are known to bear texts and signatures engraved by Western travelers who thus left traces of their passage on walls, columns and statues beginning after the Napoleonic expedition.

Sudan, although less frequented, did not escape this certainly depreciable practice. Indeed, none of the European explorers in Batn el-Hagar avoided the temptation to leave graffiti on archaeological sites, as if there was some mysterious force pushing them to this act, undeniable because visible, once they had reached their so longed-for destination.

Even George Alexander Hoskins, antiquarian, writer and excellent draftsman, who openly condemned the diffusion of the practice to deface monuments, admitted his own “guilt” in this respect: “I confess on my first visit to the Nile, I wrote my name on one of the colossal statues in the interior of Aboo Simbel” (Hoskins 1863: 210).

On the other hand, in Nubia the recourse to such a habit had roots in a most remote antiquity. It is well attested to by the names of Greek mercenaries in Psameticus’ service engraved in Abu Simbel and those of Roman legionaries carved in the temples of Pselchis (Fantusati 1999) and Hiera Sycaminos (Fantusati 2003a). Then there are the graffiti left by Egyptians or by Nubians themselves on the rocks of the third cataract on the Nile (Fantusati 2006) as well as on the walls of the great enclosure in Musawwarat el-Sufra (Mirghani 2005).

It was therefore a fashion destined to continue unchanged through ancient and modern times. After all, is it not almost natural that the 19th century Western visitors, protagonists of truly epic trips to reach the mythical “island of Meroe”, desired to leave a trace of their passage through a sort of modern *proskynema* celebrating their efforts to reach places held inaccessible and unreachable.

Today, reading their engraved names allows us not only a comparison with what is known from various sources, but also knowledge of sojourns sometimes not mentioned in any of the available ones.

Immediately after Mohamed Ali’s expedition in the Sudan, the Italian community in Khartoum,

composed of soldiers, explorers, merchants and, in the second wave clerics, was quite considerable. For a long time the call of the exotic and of adventure drew many Italians to Africa. In the early 19th century, they had no qualms about leaving a fragmented country, not only governed by foreign powers, but also the theatre of bloody wars for independence. Their presence in Africa grew progressively to such an extent that Italian, taught in Khartoum’s missionary schools, became the commercial language of the Sudan. For a long time, it was employed both in the official documents of the local Austrian consulate and in the Egyptian postal service before being definitely supplanted by French after the opening of the Suez Canal (Romanato 1998: 289).

Naturally, the many Italians visiting archaeological sites in Nubia did not refrain from leaving graffiti just like the other Europeans. Here I shall examine three little known examples which are despite everything of notable interest.

The first one is located in the Semna temple. The building, dating back to the Egyptian Eighteenth Dynasty, was transferred from its original location to Khartoum in 1963 as part of the Nubian salvage campaign, and can be seen now in the gardens of the National Museum.

Among the countless inscriptions of 19th century personages, there are not a few Italian names. Tangible signs of their visit were left on the walls of the Semna temple by Giovanni Finati (1787-1829) who preferred the name AGIMVA-MET after converting to Islam, Domenico Ermenegildo Frediani (1783-1823) who used the acronym AMIRO, a certain Mugnaini who visited Semna in 1840, and Augusto Diamanti, author of an elaborate graffito in the form of a pylon, dated “28.10.1849”.

Among all these testimonies there is one, which is perhaps not so obvious compared to the others, but which evokes a particularly significant moment in the history of Nubian antiquities. It is a graffito of small dimensions (about 2 by 10 cm), engraved on the east wall inside the temple [Fig. 1]. It has been reproduced on three occasions (Dunham and Janssens 1960: Pl. 21b; De Keersmaecker 2003: 36; Fantusati 2003b: Pl. 70), but its date and the circumstances of its execution

remain murky to say the least. The name is to be read as follows:

FERLINI

There can be no doubt as to the identity of the owner of this graffito. It is the Italian physician Giuseppe Ferlini (1797-1870) [Fig. 1] whose fame draws from discoveries effected by questionable methods in the royal necropolis of Meroe. Ferlini could have visited Semna on only two occasions: firstly during the last months of 1830, when he sojourned at length in the area of the second cataract of the Nile, waiting for a caravan to Khartoum, and secondly in the spring of 1835, as he returned from the Sudan after a four years' stay.

On the first occasion, probably in November 1830, just about two months after leaving Cairo, Ferlini stopped in Wadi Halfa no less than one month as he reports in his diary: "*Il capo di tutti i villaggi che si trovano dalla prima cateratta alla seconda, cioè Vodo Alfa (questo capo o governatore è detto masir) aveva ordine dal governo del Cairo di provvederci di cammelli per trapassare i piccoli deserti, le cateratte ed il regno di Dongola ... dopo diciannove giorni ecco giungere i cammelli e si preparano le cariche di ogni bestia*" (Ferlini 1981: 39). The departure, cited in the same diary, occurred three days later: "*dopo ventidue giorni di disgustosa dimora in questo luogo, dopo mezzogiorno ci mettemmo in cammino*" (Ferlini 1981: 40).

As for his second opportunity, Ferlini's return from Meroe was a rushed affair, the physician being eager for the caravan bearing a heavy and cumbersome load made up of not only the precious jewelry found in Begrawiya, but also numerous archaeological pieces, stuffed animals and heavy minerals, to reach a safe destination as quickly as possible. Considering this fact, I would be more inclined to date his graffito in Semna to 1830. This theory appears all the more sustainable in view of the Italian's lengthy presence in the Batn el-Hagar region that year and his interest in pharaonic monuments encountered on his



Fig. 1. Graffito of Ferlini from Semna
(Photo E. Fantusati)

journey from Cairo: "*si giunse dopo sedici giorni di navigazione all'antica Tebe; qui ci fermammo per quattro giorni andando ogni giorno a visitare quegli avanzi dell'antica grandezza*" (Ferlini 1981: 34). It is certainly on that occasion that the Bolognese physician left another graffito, this time on the walls of the Seti I temple in Gurneh. After all, he could not have failed to observe the frequency with which Western travellers 'adorned' the monuments they visited with their names: "*visitai le isole di File e di Elefantina ove esistono monumenti antichi e colossi, già descritti da molti viaggiatori; vi si trovano scolpiti in più parte i nomi dei generali della spedizione francese sotto Buonaparte*" (Ferlini 1981: 35-36).

Curiously, Ferlini left no traces in Meroe, where his fame was made, and where we would expect to find signs of his prolonged presence.

The other two "Italian" names that I have found engraved in the northern necropolis of Begrawiya have proved equally interesting. Both appear on the outside western wall of the funerary chapel of pyramid Beg. 7, which is attributed to the sovereign Arqamani (218-200 BC). Neither of the inscriptions has been mentioned in any of the sources to my knowledge.



Fig. 2. Portrait of Giuseppe Ferlini
(after Ferlini 1981)

The first, carved in capital characters with the exception of “r”, runs in two lines: the first initial of the name and the last name in the top line and the date in the bottom one [Fig. 3]:

G. DrOVETTI
1832

Carefully executed, the graffito appears to signify a leisurely visit to the necropolis. It measures about 10 by 50 cm and is nicely fitted into the frame of a sandstone block in the wall.

At first examination, the name calls to mind Bernardino Drovetti (1776-1852), an Italian by birth for he was born in Barbania not far from Turin, but French by adoption. In 1802, aged twenty-six, Drovetti was appointed consul of France in Egypt. Having established firm relations with Mohamed Ali, Drovetti embarked on intense archaeological activities, which would eventually provide the basis for the Egyptian collections in both Turin and Paris.

Upon closer analysis, however, I must admit to serious doubts concerning Bernardino Drovetti’s presence in Meroe. It is unusual for a visit to the ancient Sudanese capital to have so completely escaped the attention of contemporaries and later researchers. Moreover, there is no other graffito attributable to this Italian archaeologist at any of the other Nubian sites south of Abu Simbel.

In any case, why would he have engraved his initial as “G” and not “B” for Bernardino? The graffito’s attribution is also suspect because of the dating. In Drovetti’s letters, he speaks of his unstable health around 1830; he was particularly prone to bouts of cholera during 1832, as confirmed by the contents of a letter dated “Turin June 5th, 1832”, sent to him by Etienne Abro: “votre fils se plaint que vous l’avez quitté en colère. J’espère que d’après le bon coeur que vous avez, votre colère est déjà passée” (Curto and

Donatelli 1985: 632). But in July the situation was still unresolved and an Italian physician, Benedetto Trompeo, consulted by Drovetti himself, wrote to him from Turin on the 3rd: “io mi do a credere che i bagni le saranno di giovamento venendo al morbo indicato le dirò che si estende, infuria in alcuni luoghi, e veste carattere sempre specifico e con andamento stazionario come il vaiuolo” (Curto and Donatelli 1985: 634).

If Drovetti’s presence in Meroe appears unlikely in 1832, then wherefrom comes this particular name on the pyramid Beg. 7?

Reviewing Italian onomastics in the Sudan at the beginning of the 19th century, I have excluded an improbable coincidence of names, preferring instead to concentrate on Drovetti’s family. Upon examining his voluminous letters, I have discovered that Drovetti had a son named Giorgio. This has led me to conclude that the graffito in Begrawiya was made by none other than Giorgio Drovetti (Curto and Donatelli 1985: 612, 632). Not only does the initial fit, but also it is a known fact that by the offices of his father Giorgio was working in 1832 in the Sardinian Consulate in Egypt and dealt actively with family business in Fayum (Curto and Donatelli 1985: 655).

How and why Giorgio reached Meroe from Egypt remains an open question. It cannot be said whether he traveled privately or on behalf of his father. The loss of most of the letters written by Bernardino Drovetti in answer to those from his son leaves the two questions without answer for the moment.

The second graffito left by a previously unknown Italian appears on the same wall of the funerary chapel, higher up, on two blocks to the left of Drovetti’s signature [Fig. 4]. It is also done in capital characters and measures about 10 by 50 cm. The name given is:

CONTARINY



Fig. 3. Graffito of G. Drovetti from Begrawiya (Photo E. Fantusati)



Fig. 4. Graffito of Contariny from Begrawiya (Photo E. Fantusati)

Two more or less contemporary Italians of this name were present in the Sudan around 1850. Carlo Teofilo Contarini may have arrived in Khartoum after having been exiled from Venice, while Carlo Contarini worked as an interpreter in the service of the Belgian consul of Alexandria, Blondeel van Cuelebroeck, who upon returning from Abyssinia embarked on a journey to Nubia in 1842 (Hill 1967: 104). In view of this fact, perhaps the graffito in Meroe could be attributed to the latter. It is difficult to be more specific than that.

One is nevertheless curious why the name has been written as “Contariny” and not “Contarini”

in the Italian way. Giuseppe Ferlini may have an interesting explanation for this matter. Writing to Paul-Emile Botta, an Italian by birth, Ferlini remarked sarcastically how the family name of the physician and naturalist, famous for his researches in Assyria and along the Nile, was pronounced amiss in French as “Bottà”.¹ About this Ferlini wrote: “*se il scrivente per francese si fosse detto e Ferliny si fosse scritto*” (Ferlini 1981: 141). The yet unidentified Contarini of Meroe could have opted therefore for a French version of his own name and, in keeping with the diffused tastes of his age, could have inserted a final “Y” instead of the “I”.

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¹ Paul-Emile Botta, son of the historian Carlo, was born in Turin on 6 December 1802.